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Normalizing Non-Neutral: Towards an Inclusive Acting Pedagogy

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Abstract: This paper uses the social model of disability to provide an overview of the unseen obstacles and microaggressions that drama students with disabilities often face when navigating an artistic and academic landscape designed for their non-disabled peers, and advocates for disability awareness and allyship on the part of instructors.

Keywords: Theatre; Disability; Secondary-education

Knowledge Focus: Research/Theory Focus

Topic Area: Inclusion; Post-Secondary Education

Introduction

In the afterword to the 2008 edition of Konstantin Stanislavski's book *An Actor's Work*, Anatoly Smeliansky writes that "no one seriously concerned with teaching theatre across the world can refuse to acknowledge K.S.'s work, just as no one interested in chemistry can refuse to acknowledge the periodic table created by Demitri Mendeleiev" (p. 693). In her forward to another translation entitled *An Actor Prepares*, Bella Merlin writes "there can barely be an acting school or a theatre studies major that doesn't have *An Actor Prepares* on it's reading list" (Stanislavski, 2015, p. viii). There is no doubt about Stanislavski's reputation within actor training programs; however, what is less discussed is his system's profound perpetuation of ableist approaches to actor training that still dominate the field of theatre. In addition to sustaining the archaic practice of encouraging non-disabled actors to 'crip-up' for disabled roles, his reliance on the widely adopted concept of 'neutral' as a requirement of a successful actor is frequently used by gatekeepers to disenfranchise actors with disabilities whose bodies and movements do not fit the non-disabled 'norm.' Deric McNish (2018) writes of the "strong psychosocial meaning tied to markers of disability onstage," which pre-inscribe an actor's real-life disability with implied meanings regarding their character's interiority (p. 142). Stanislavski further reinforces this practice, in one instance asking his sighted students to feel around a dark room before lecturing that: "All this taken together adds up to blindness. It must be understood as an inner sense of a person, not merely an external defect ...What the spectator must have is the primary impact of blindness ... not all the commentary, not all the literature on the subject" (Stanislavski, 2015, p. 142). The continued veneration of Stanislavski's system only reinforces the ableist framework with which his system has become synonymous. As disability studies scholars Carrie Sandhal and Phillip Auslander conclude, "Ultimately, unless training programs' very foundations are rehabilitated, current curriculum will dissuade actors with disabilities from pursuing training," (2005, p. 256). In this paper I argue that in order to truly create an equitable

learning environment for acting students with disabilities, programs must stop perpetuating offensive and exclusionary acting pedagogies and instead design acting curricula and policies with students with disabilities in mind.

The Social Model of Disability and Universal Design for Learning

Two theoretical frameworks within disability studies must be understood in order to fully grasp the unwarranted discrimination against actors with disabilities in actor training programs: the social model of disability, and Universal Design for Learning or UDL. Historically, Western society has largely followed the medical model of disability, which regards disability as a tragic individual problem which must be fixed through medical intervention in order to adapt the disabled individual to better function within society. Conversely, the social model of disability focuses on society itself the source of disability by restricting impaired individuals through a lack of accessibility and inclusion. According to the *Routledge Handbook of Disability Studies*, the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation defines disability under the social model as, "the disadvantage of restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organisation which takes no or little account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from participation in the mainstream of social activities … disability is something imposed on top of our impairments by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from society" (Watson, Roulstone, & Thomas, 2012, p. 14). In order to combat this, UDL attempts to make the classroom less disabling to students by attempting to construct policies and curriculums with all possible students in mind, including students with a wide range of disabilities. This method has the important added benefit of improving the learning environment for all students with disabilities, regardless of whether they self-identify to the instructor as having a disability. Self-identification would otherwise be necessary in order for a student to self-advocate for individualized accommodations. The three core guidelines of UDL encourage instructors to: "provide multiple means of representation, provide multiple means of action and expression, and provide multiple means of engagement" (McNish, 2018, p. 141). Contrary to these two beneficial frameworks, most modern actor training programs not only treat disability as a problem intrinsic to the individual, but also design courses and curriculums with only non-disabled students in mind.

The Repercussions of an Inflexible System

Many actor training programs still hold the ignorant notion that an absence of disability is necessary to become a talented actor, and that actors with disabilities simply cannot succeed in rigorous training programs. In *The Politics of American Actor Training*, Victoria Ann Lewis (2011) recounts the experience of an aspiring actor with a disability, who during their final audition for a prominent Master of Fine Arts (MFA) acting program was confronted by a movement instructor who assumed a headstand and asked, "This is what we do in my class. Can you do that?" The student could not, and though this student was not blocked from entering the program itself, the movement instructor barred them from enrolling in his classes (Lewis, 2011,

p. 179). Ask almost any student with a disability who has attempted to navigate an actor training program and you will hear similar, if not worse, experiences of blatant ableism. Lewis asserts that many disabled acting students are told by programs that "because of your disability you will not work and because of your physical impairment you will not be able to fulfill the requirements of our curriculum" (Lewis, 2011, p. 179). This pervasive discrimination is in part due to the theatre field's slow action in adopting new and progressive pedagogies. In his chapter "Training Actors with Disabilities," Deric McNish explains that "in practice, biases are not uncommon … studies in disability culture and identity are relatively young which means that acting teachers are unlikely to have experience employing current and positive disability models" (McNish, 2018, p. 142). However, in many acting methods, the idea of eliminating physical pain and struggle runs counter to the instructor's own rhetoric. In the posthumous work *Stanislavski's Legacy*, translated by Elisabeth Reynolds Hapgood, Stanislavski states that "the work of an actor and director, as we understand it here, is a painful process … [it] is one that requires enormous self-mastery and often also great physical endurance" (Stanislavski, 2015, p. 9). There is also a much higher value placed on these revered and established methods, many of which are difficult to adapt to accommodate students with disabilities.

Stanislavski and the Notion of Neutral

Stanislavski's core concept of neutrality opened a Pandora's box of ability-charged rhetoric within actor training. First existing purely in oral form before it was finally published in 1936, Stanislavski's system aims to train the actor to "switch off the brain entirely, to become a blank sheet of paper and move into the unconscious in a neutral state" (Stanislavski, 2008, p. 691). Stanislavski's followers as well as divergent theorists have further perpetuated the concept of neutral, and solidified it as a core tenant of most actor training methods. Influential French acting coach Jacques Lecoq pioneered the use of "neutral mask" which he cites as the central point of his teaching method, he describes the mask as a "generic being" and observes that "beneath the neutral mask the actor's face disappears and his body becomes more noticeable" (Lecoq & Bradby, 2006, p. 39). Heather Corwin, an MFA who practices the alternative pseudo-medicine of Rolfing, further elaborates on the modern ideal of the neutral actor, stating that an actor's "neutral body is highly adaptable and aligned, a body that employs economy of motion and is agile, with freedom to make new choices through motion at a moment's impulse," and that for actors who neglect to gain control of their voice and body "by the time they become bored with the narrow spectrum of roles they are to able to play, it is usually too late" (Corwin, 2012, pp. 38–39). For actors with disabilities whose bodies maintain a state of constant conflict, and thus diverge from the non-disabled norm, the construct of 'neutral' can be impossible to achieve. Sandahl tackles this field-wide problem in her essay "The Tyranny of Neutral: Disability & Actor Training," in which she states "Implicit in the various manifestations of the neutral metaphor is the assumption that a character cannot be built from a position of physical difference … Stanislavski emphasized that the actors themselves should be as free as possible of physical defect" (Sandhal & Auslander, 2005, pp. 260–61). Not only does an insistence on neutrality

preclude actors with disabilities from playing non-disabled characters, but it also insists upon non-disabled actors 'cripping-up' in order to play disabled roles. Many actors with disabilities who have found work playing either disabled or non-disabled roles on screen and stage acquired their disability only after receiving their training and establishing their careers, including Michael J. Fox, Sarah Bernhardt, and Christopher Reeve.

External Disability as Internal Flaw

Theatre as an artform has a long and fraught history of utilizing physical disability, feigned by non-disabled actors, to express internal character flaws. Petra Kuppers acknowledges the "pervasive attitude towards disability as a metaphor" and asserts that "to open up this world of deep and profound difference, all a non-disabled performer has to do is get handy with a wheelchair" (Kuppers, 2013, p. 12). Performative disabilities used for dramatic effect bank on a non-disabled audience's own feelings of pity and fear towards disability in order to elicit an emotional reaction. Similarly, when used to clue the audience in on a character's interiority, the signifier of disability is rarely associated with admirable character traits; take, for example, villainous King Richard in Shakespeare's *Richard III*, and fragile Laura in Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*. Stanislavski's system takes a similarly counterproductive attitude towards acting characters with disabilities, and his personal opinions on the topic, as evident in *An Actor Prepares and Stanislavski's Legacy*, are highly reductive (Stanislavski, 2008, 2015).

Two notable exercises Stanislavski's proxy character, Tortov, devises for his acting students which utilize stereotypical depictions of disability as a means of provoking 'authentic' performances in his students include 'the madman behind the door' and 'the money thrown into the fire by the simple brother.' In 'the madman behind the door' Tortov attempts to give his students a "deeper, and more complicated" motivation by asking them "but suppose that in this apartment of Maria's there used to live a man that became violently insane. They took him away to a psychopathic ward. If he escaped from there, and were behind that door, what would you do?" Considering this question, the students begin hiding in various spaces within the apartment, arming themselves with heavy objects, and planning how they might barricade the door (Stanislavski, 2008, p. 39). In 'the money thrown into the fire by the simple brother' the instructor attempts to distract his students from focusing on the audience by providing them with a scene that he describes as "enough of a tragedy." The scene involves "Vanya, a low type of moron" who after watching his brother-in-law throw paper wrappings in the fire imitates him by throwing several stacks of paper money into the fire. Upon seeing what he's done, Vanya's brother-in-law throws him to the floor causing him to bleed (Stanislavski, 2008, p. 64). Considering these exercises from a contemporary perspective, the offensiveness of these characterizations may appear obvious. However, in the introduction to the 2014 Bloomsbury Revelations Edition of *An Actor Prepares*, Bella Merlin, an acting professor at University of California, Riverside, writes: "Even those allusions that may now seem old-fashioned or specific to pre-revolutionary Russia can appeal to the lively imagination and make their points succinctly

... The madman behind the door. The money thrown into the fire by the simple brother. Each image is vivid and has its purpose in unlocking the actor's craft" (Stanislavski, 2014, p. viii).

Redesigning the Acting Classroom

In redesigning the acting classroom while keeping students with disabilities in mind, some of the necessary changes also apply to any higher education course that wants to better accommodate these students. One of these major areas is strict attendance policies, which, as Melissa Nicolas writes, "are premised on ableist assumptions of a "normal" student body" (Nicolas, 2017, p. 11). These policies are often even more strict in courses that require daily physical participation such as acting. On January 1st 2018, New York University (NYU) Department of Performance Studies' studies implemented a series of strict new policies regarding student attendance. The PDF document, which is prominently featured on the department's website, states that for both undergraduate and graduate students: "absences due to health reasons, justified by [an] appropriate medical note" are considered excused, but that "Reasonable accommodations do not negate requirements for successful completion of a program, course, or service or adherence to acceptable standards of behavior. It is important to note that some accommodations are not appropriate in all courses," and that "nonjustified absences should have a negative impact on a student final grade" (New York University Department of Performance Studies [NYU], 2018). The harsh and accusatory tone of NYU's policy further alienates students with disabilities who frequently deal with doctor's appointments, medical emergencies, and debilitating symptoms which may prevent them from attending class. Nicolas states that "having to be an exception, asking for an exemption, being a special case is not a desirable position to be in, yet, policies (and pedagogies) premised on ableism situate students with disabilities in precisely this position all the time" (Nicolas, 2017, p. 15). Subsequently, more equitable attendance policies are a great place to start for any course regardless of its content.

For acting programs specifically, there is no one instructional method that is guaranteed to perfectly accommodate every disability, just as there is no one method that is most effective for every actor. Following UDL, it's best to employ multiple means of engagement, which means exploring many different voice and movement techniques within a single course. Some actors with disabilities have found Decroux's mime techniques and Laban/Bartenieff movement analysis especially effective in their training (Lewis, 2011, p. 192). Additionally, whenever specific bodily movements are described in an exercise, it is helpful to instead focus on the overarching impression of the physical action so that students with disabilities are not excluded. McNish describes several useful examples: "must a student 'walk like a cow,' or can the student 'move like a cow?' Can the 'divine neutral' be a personal place rather than a universal one? Can we 'send our energy upward' if we're unable to 'stand straight?'" (McNish, 2018, p. 153). By adjusting the bodily rhetoric of these exercises, actors with disabilities are automatically included in the instructions and are still able to make their own creative choices in how they execute these movements. Finally, one of the most important changes that can be made is to actively recruit

students with disabilities to participate in acting courses and theatre productions. Instructors must go beyond the bare minimum of accommodation and make a conscious effort to engage and empower aspiring actors with disabilities in order to ensure that these talented performers finally reach a long overdue parity in the classroom and subsequently on the stage.

Best Practices for an Inclusive Acting Pedagogy Following PACRIM 2020

These recommendations are informed by the scholarship of Deric McNish (2018), Victoria Anne Lewis (2011), and Carrie Sandhal (2005).

- Do not require a physical state of neutral, instead allow the term to be individually interpreted by each actor.
- Avoid specific physical directions that contain exclusionary rhetoric (i.e. ‘walk,’ ‘stand,’ “see,’ ‘listen,’ etc.), and instead opt for more inclusive alternatives.
- Embrace an equitable attendance policy and allow students to access the information and assignments that they might miss during an absence.
- Plan alternate ways that students can make up performance based assessments if they are ill or injured, such as submitting a video of their monologue.
- When assigning texts with problematic disabled representation, lead a critical discussion of the material that addresses the ableism.
- When requiring students to attend a live performance, ensure that the venue is accessible and, whenever possible, allow students to individually select from a variety of dates and times during the run.
- Include a variety of different movement and voice techniques within each course.
- Experiment with casting and don’t be afraid to cast against “type.” Give students with disabilities the opportunity to take on both disabled and nondisabled roles.
- Express confidence in each student’s acting ability.
- Do not fall back on grading based on ‘effort’ and ‘dedication’ which can look vastly different from student to student. Instead focus on growth and the mastery of specific concepts.
- Never require any student to disclose their disability or disability status to you. Let the class know that you’re open to making individual accommodations and always let students come to you if they need them.

- Allow actors with disabilities the same creative freedom you would any other actor, do not force an acting choice on them.
- Maintain a challenging standard for the course. Though society may often have low expectations for performers with disabilities, these biases do not have to translate into the classroom.
- Ensure that rehearsal spaces and classrooms are consistent and accessible.
- Whenever unsure of how to best accommodate a student, always ask.
- Actively recruit students with disabilities. Clearly state that they are welcome to join the class in the course description and any course advertisements. Bonus points if you make your syllabus available so students can see proof of your course's commitment to inclusion.

Author

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